

McClatchy

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WASHINGTON — Flora Brooks on Friday touched the engraved name of her late husband, the wounded soldier who won her devotion.

For 42 years, the couple from California's San Joaquin Valley shared a life no marital vow could anticipate. He was grievously brain-damaged and legless, a residue of Vietnam War combat. She rarely left his side, tending him daily in their Stockton-area home until he died last year.

Now, Johnny Owen Brooks' name is shining like new on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, and Flora is feeling like justice is done.

"Really, I feel like Johnny represents all those thousands who suffered over there," Flora said Friday morning. "In a sense, his life ended there. He couldn't start a family. He couldn't hug his wife. And yet, to me, he was my husband."

She smiled. It was another beautiful day: Spring, with heavenly blue skies above. Around Flora and her sister-in-law, Donna Vaughn, flowed a stream of chattering tourists.

On Sunday, a formal ceremony led by retired Army Lt. Gen. Mick Kicklighter will mark the addition of Johnny Owen Brooks' name and nine others to the Wall. Six of the men died during the 1960s, but it took officials a long time to affirm their deaths were war-related. Four of the men, like Brooks, died long after their service ended, forcing family members to prove a link to the war.

David Lawrence Deckard, for one, died of respiratory failure six years ago in Louisville, Ky. The

real cause, though, was the rocket that hit his armored personnel carrier in March 1969, sending shrapnel into his chest and paralyzing him from the chest down. As with Brooks, and the others, family members had to convince the Defense Department that Deckard's name belonged on the Wall.

"The process is not an easy one," said Lee Allen, communications director for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. "Sometimes, it's the culmination of years of effort."

Technically speaking, pneumonia was considered Brooks' official cause of death when he passed away at age 62 in late February 2011. In the bigger picture, a mortar shell of uncertain provenance ripped him in a Nov. 14, 1969, explosion while he was serving with Company B, 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment of the famed 1st Infantry Division.

"It took me 40 years to learn all that," Flora said.

Owens' initial injuries sent him to Japan, where doctors amputated his right leg. He arrived in the United States, mentally intact. He was fine for 10 days, doing well enough at San Francisco's Letterman Army Hospital that Flora could leave to run an errand. She and Johnny had only been married three weeks before he received his draft notice; and, however complicated, they could picture their peacetime future together. Then, amid routine skin-graft surgery, Owens went into cardiac arrest. Oxygen stopped flowing to his brain.

"When I came back to the hospital, he was in a coma," Flora said.

At first, Owens could make sounds; unintelligible, perhaps, to others, but Flora felt they were communicating. Their eyes connected. She could tell when he was content, or anxious. Following a second tracheotomy in 1981, he became altogether speechless.

Up until his final two days, Brooks had been living in the couple's Morada, Calif., home. He slept in a bed in their living room. She had her own bed, next to his. She washed him daily and managed his bowels. She quilted and she talked to him. She made sure the television never, ever showed a war movie.

“He was the joy of my life,” Flora said, “and we made his life as rich as we could.”

About a month after Owens passed away, Flora contacted the office of Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Calif., and set in motion the application to have her late husband’s name added to the Wall. A doctor’s letter turned the tide, effectively tying the proximate cause of Owens’ death to his long-ago war injuries.

Only 343 new names have been added onto the Wall since the memorial was dedicated in 1982. With the latest additions, there are 58,282 names representing those who were killed or who remain classified as missing in action. Right now, the new additions stand out because they are so bright. In time, their hue becomes uniform, the march of one ghost after another.

“It’s going to be hard to walk away from this,” Flora said, and then she turned to find, once more, the name of her beloved.